

Wadah Khanfar: The Middle East Is on the Brink of Explosion





There is no doubt that we are living through a pivotal moment—one that rarely recurs in history—a moment where old endings intertwine with new beginnings. The international order as we know it is cracking; major powers are faltering, while others quietly rise toward the center.

In the midst of this, one of the most heinous crimes of the modern era is being committed in Gaza, under the full view of the world, without any action from a system that has long claimed to protect “humanity.”

To grasp this moment, it is not enough to view the facts as they stand; we must trace them back to their historical roots—to earlier junctures when the balance of power shifted, and new maps were drawn on the ruins of the old.

In an extensive analytical session titled “Threads of Fire,” Wadah Khanfar—former Director General of Al Jazeera Network and current President of the Al Sharq Forum—offers a comprehensive reading of today’s global power dynamics.

He focuses on the West’s entrenched sense of superiority in its dealings with the Middle East, and its persistent attempts to impose realities that serve its own interests at the expense of the region’s peoples. This report highlights the key points he addressed.

“The Western Mind Does Not Understand Us”

Khanfar begins by noting that the West does not view the peoples of this region as partners in civilization or as makers of policy, but rather as an empty space to be engineered according to its needs.

He recalls historical symbols such as Godfrey of Bouillon, the so-called “Protector of the Holy Sepulcher,” and Napoleon, who arrived in Egypt with an army of scholars under the pretense of liberating it from “barbarism.”

This mentality, he stresses, has not changed; it has merely been repackaged in modern political rhetoric under slogans like “democracy” and “peace.”

The West not only claims dominance over the present but also attributes to itself the very creation of the global order and its legal principles—willfully ignoring the fact that systems of governance and diplomacy were established in the East long before the West even emerged.



In this context, Khanfar cites one of the earliest known security treaties in human history, signed in 1259 BCE between ancient Egypt and the Hittite Empire—then ruling over what is now Turkey.

The treaty outlined mutual respect for sovereignty, military cooperation, and the extradition of fugitives, underscoring that concepts such as statehood, alliances, and sovereignty predate the West’s so-called “modern” values by millennia.

Western Efforts to Impose a “New Middle East”

From the same superiority complex springs the West’s ongoing effort to impose its vision of a “New Middle East,” with Israel as its central power. Normalization

with Israel is presented as the sole path to peace and prosperity, as if the region's stability can only be achieved under the umbrella of accepting and entrenching Israel as a regional leader.

Khanfar recalls President George W. Bush's 2004 "New Middle East" initiative, which was accompanied by intensive meetings with Arab states to pave the way for normalization. Just two years later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice launched a similar effort under the slogan "The New Middle East Is Being Born." In each case, the same message was repeated: Arabs supposedly require external management of their affairs.

He warns that this same strategy is still being applied to the Palestinian cause—drawing Arabs and Palestinians back into "the bottleneck" of fruitless negotiations that produce only more concessions.

From the 1993 Oslo Accords, hailed as a "historic solution," to the 2000 Camp David Summit and the 2007 Annapolis Conference, the pattern remains the same: a Palestinian uprising is followed by a fragile political settlement that ultimately strengthens the occupation rather than curbing it.

This cycle was evident again at the recent New York Conference, where the "two-state solution" was floated once more without any tangible measures to halt Israel's massacres in Gaza—despite growing popular and international outrage. Western elites, he argues, seek to drain their publics' sympathy through token gestures, such as France's recent announcement of its intention to recognize Palestine.

"This is not about redrawing the Middle East," Khanfar says, "but about rehabilitating Israel—from a state committing genocide to a state engaged in a so-called peace process."

The Middle East Is Not Managed... It Erupts

Khanfar asserts that this region cannot be subjected to long-term external management. It may endure a period of silence or submission, but it eventually erupts.

The people here, he says, possess "deep strategic patience," capable of enduring humiliation and harm for long stretches—yet when they reach the edge of pain, everything changes.

In such moments, it is not Western initiatives that bring transformation, but the eruption itself.

What the region is experiencing today is not an exception but part of what he calls "protrusions of history"—recurring phenomena in the life cycle of ancient civilizations, which may undergo dramatic upheavals without losing their

fundamental identity. The Middle East, he says, may turn upside down, but its deep civilizational structure endures.

Do We Have a Geopolitical Center?

Khanfar notes that the world order is in “labor,” no longer able to sustain Western unipolarity. Powers such as China and Russia are vying for central positions. But unless Arab states develop a clear project and independent alliances, they will be among the victims—not the architects—of the new system.

Moments of global restructuring, as after the two World Wars, often see weak nations sidelined. Without a regional geopolitical framework, the Middle East will once again be reshaped solely according to the visions of great powers.

Khanfar believes that the present moment offers an unusual opportunity: Israel is no longer seen merely as a “rogue state” but as a genuine adversary by powers seeking to expand their influence in the region.

Yet the Arab world today lacks a collective vision for national security; each state acts individually, courting Israel or the US to serve narrow interests. Israel, meanwhile, approaches the region from a doctrine of superiority and domination.

“Great nations,” he concludes, “are those prepared to pay the price, and capable of creating allies.”

A Crisis of Governance, Not of Identity

Khanfar emphasizes that the Arab problem is not one of modern ideas, technology, or knowledge, nor is it an identity crisis. It is a failure of governance—of managing politics, resources, and power. Historically, the Islamic world always recovered after major setbacks—except in the past century, which he attributes to the loss of the ummah concept.

The Sykes–Picot Agreement not only divided geography but planted a dangerous illusion: that the peoples of this region share no social or strategic bond. This illusion undermined one of the Islamic world’s greatest historical strengths—its ability to regain cohesion after each calamity.

For centuries, whenever the Islamic world suffered a crushing blow, it was able to rise again, fueled by a deep belief in the ummah and the interdependence of its parts. The 20th century, Khanfar says, was the most dangerous of all because it “destroyed our strongest asset—the belief in the ummah.

We became powerless and fragmented, watching massacres in Gaza and elsewhere with nothing but sympathy to offer. And sympathy, if it does not turn into action, is nothing but an illusion and a form of defeat.”

Khanfar concludes by noting that Arab and Islamic history has always been



shaped by two competing currents: the current of unity, which generates prosperity and strength, and the current of fragmentation, which Israel feeds on for its survival. Israel's very existence, he says, is premised on the conviction that Arabs are irreversibly divided.

In short, the opportunity today exists to rebuild a meaningful Arab presence in the emerging world order—but it will not come through conferences or speeches. It will require conscious alliances, sovereign decision-making centers, and investment in the awareness of the ummah, not in mere sentiment. For, as Khanfar sees it, the Middle East will either be managed from within—or it will erupt from within.

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